

# **2025 State of the Union Essay Contest Winning Essays**



**U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders**

**Winner**

Justason Lahue (Burr and Burton Academy, Junior)

Social media and adolescent mental health

**Second Place**

Ari Glasser (Essex High School, Junior)

Influence of billionaires on American politics

**Third Place**

Ely White (Leland and Gray Union Middle High School, Senior)

Political polarization

**Finalists**

*(in alphabetical order)*

Leo Beebe (Winooski High School, Senior)

Emilee Brownell (Essex High School, Junior)

Sofia Bush (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)

Aleksandra Cirovic (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)

Allie Hamilton (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)

Mia Konefal (South Burlington High School, Freshmen)

Hazel O'Brien (Twinfield Union School, Senior)

MacKenzie Russell (Harwood Union High School, Junior)

Hannah Smiley (Milton High School, Senior)

Winslow Solomon (Vermont Commons School, Senior)

Owen Stygles (Bellows Free Academy Fairfax, Senior)

Amy Vaughan (Oxbow High School, Junior)

**Winner**  
**Justason Lahue (Burr and Burton Academy, Junior)**

Social media is deteriorating adolescent mental health, yet the United States' government is treating the situation like a social experiment; our government is waiting to see what will happen despite the mounting evidence that social media has dangerous effects. Until we apply evidence-based regulations to limit social media use, adolescent well-being is in jeopardy.

The current evidence of harm is compelling. A 2023 Gallup survey found that teenagers spend an average of 4.8 hours on social media daily. Alarmingly, a longitudinal study involving 6,595 adolescents revealed that spending over 3 hours daily on social media doubled the risk of poor mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression. These are not studies in isolation: a systematic review of 13 studies also found that unhealthy engagement of social media was correlated with depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.

While these studies demonstrate correlation, there are also indicators of causality. Numerous studies highlight how limiting social media use can improve mental health. A randomized controlled trial reported that reducing social media use by just 30 minutes daily lessened depressive symptoms in college students. Another study involving adolescents showed that ceasing social media use for 4 weeks resulted in a 25-40% improvement in subjective well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, depression, and anxiety) when compared to psychological interventions such as therapy.

Social media use can worsen adolescent mental health, while lessening use demonstrates the opposite effect. Adolescent brain development is most active from ages 10 to 14. However, the arbitrary and rarely enforced 'internet age' currently set at 13 exposes immature brains to a world of entertainment, inappropriate content, and harassment. Given these biological factors and the evidence of potential harm, a more appropriate age for adolescents to access the internet is 16 years of age.

I propose a bill called the Youth Mental Health Protection Act. This act would target a root cause of social media-related youth mental health issues by changing the legal age of 'internet adulthood' (i.e., when one can sign up for most online platforms, consent to terms of service, and share personal data). This act would make 16 the legally required age to access social media, similar to obtaining a driver's license in most states, another privilege requiring complex thinking and decision-making. Finally, the Youth Mental Health Protection Act would hold social media companies liable by requiring age verification prior to account creation.

Requiring age checks would likely lessen the negative effects of social media on adolescent mental health, however, this is just one step the United States government needs to take to solve this crisis. To counteract the harms introduced by this ongoing social experiment, policy-makers need to act now. Enacting the Youth Mental Health Protection Act and prioritizing further research on the effects of social media is imperative to safeguard the mental health of our nation's youth.

**Second Place**  
**Ari Glasser (Essex High School, Junior)**

President-elect Donald Trump has so far nominated over a dozen billionaires to his cabinet, with a combined net worth of over \$400 billion-more than ten times the GDP of the state of Vermont. In addition, Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, was one of Trump's strongest supporters during the election campaign: He donated a staggering \$277 million to Trump and other Republican candidates, according to CBS News. It is clear that the ultra-wealthy control a growing share of both political and economic power in the United States, holding disproportionate sway that erodes the power of the American people. The expanding influence of the billionaire class is one of the greatest challenges facing America today.

The recent trend of billionaire influence is reminiscent of the Gilded Age, a time when an incredibly wealthy group of industrialists such as John D. Rockefeller presided over vast monopolies while the government struggled to break them up. Meanwhile, the urban masses worked long hours with deplorable conditions and little pay. It was a kind of oligarchic society, one where these "Captains of Industry" wielded immense political and economic influence. Today, America is in a sort of Second Gilded Age-complete with drastic wealth inequality and a dangerous level of influence by the ultra-wealthy that is becoming ever nearer to oligarchy. Just 735 billionaires hold more wealth than the bottom half of all American households.

In order to reduce the concerning level of billionaire influence, many reforms must be enacted, but perhaps most important is a wealth tax. This could raise trillions of dollars for the government while also reducing the wealth and influence of billionaires over time. One such proposal would be Senator Bernie Sanders' plan, which would implement a progressive wealth tax, starting at one percent on net worth over \$32 million, up to eight percent on net worth over \$10 billion. According to Sanders, this plan would cut in half the wealth of billionaires over just 15 years, greatly reducing wealth inequality and the power of the top 0.1 percent.

In addition to reducing the economic power of billionaires, their political influence must be reduced through the use of campaign finance reform-most importantly, overturning the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*. This case eviscerated campaign finance regulations and essentially allowed unlimited contributions to political groups known as super PACs, such as the one Elon Musk donated to. While it may be difficult, passing a proposal such as the We the People Amendment would reverse the *Citizens United* decision by putting an end to the antidemocratic concepts that money equals political speech, and that corporations are people.

While there is no simple solution to ending the dangerous influence of billionaires in American politics and the economy, through important legislative action such as a wealth tax and campaign finance reform, America can stop the encroachment of oligarchy on its society.

### Third Place

#### **Ely White (Leland and Gray Union Middle High School, Senior)**

Abraham Lincoln once said, "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Speaking solemnly of the dire state of division in the United States leading up to the Civil War, it is now over a century later that his words resonate once more.

Political polarization has grown in the past decade in the United States, transforming healthy debates of ideas into an endless battle of "us" against "them." Division has infiltrated into all facets of American life, a political landscape where compromise is rare and partisan loyalty is prioritized. This deepening division threatens the ideals of our democracy, making it nearly impossible to address the critical issues that face our country today.

A 2022 NBC News survey revealed that 80% of Americans believe the opposing party "poses a threat that, if not stopped, will destroy America." This growing divide is evident in the 2018-19 government shutdown, when a standoff between Democrats and Republicans over border wall funding caused a 35-day gridlock. With neither side willing to compromise, 800,000 government workers went unpaid, and federal services became disrupted. Heightened polarization has normalized the prioritization of party loyalty over national needs, a theme of officials refusing to seek bi-partisan solutions even with critical federal services, workers, and decisions at stake. Beyond our boardrooms and capitals, division based on political views has become synonymous with what it means to be American. Pew Research Center's 2022 report on polarization shows that 72% of Republicans view Democrats as more immoral than other Americans, and 62% of Democrats say the same about Republicans. Political identity has become tribal in nature, a defining characteristic of one's morality and values. Political polarization strains relationships in families, communities, and workplaces, the American Psychological Association reporting that 38% of adults avoided conversations with people of opposing political views.

Addressing solutions to America's political division is complex. Specific systemic reforms, however, can help reduce polarization by shifting the incentives that drive division. Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is a system that allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, the votes for the lowest-ranking candidate then redistributed to voters' next choice until a majority is achieved. RCV would encourage candidates to appeal to broader ranges of voters rather than just their base, incentivizing politicians to take moderate stances rather than extreme party-driven positions. Reforming the closed primary system by adopting open or top-two systems would force candidates to appeal to a broader electorate, reducing the influence of extreme partisanship and encouraging more moderation. Integrating civic education and media literacy into our schools and communities could also work as a grassroots solution in helping individuals evaluate information and recognize bias in misinformation and ideological chambers.

The future of our democracy depends on our ability to bridge divides and prioritize unity over partisanship. We must rebuild trust, restore faith in our institutions, and create a government that serves all Americans. Change begins with us- and we call and act for a system that brings us together, not tears us apart.

**Finalists**  
*(in alphabetical order)*  
**Leo Beebe (Winooski High School, Senior)**

This December, America's debt reached an all-time high of 36 trillion dollars, and the deficit climbed yet again to two trillion dollars. This massive burden will have devastating effects on the economy and has already wreaked havoc on the federal budget. We are currently spending more money on the interest on the debt than on the military, and interest payments will only increase if nothing is done. At this very important moment for America, an honest and mature position on the budget is a necessity in our government. As such, an idea as costly as repealing the State and Local Tax (SALT) Deduction Cap should be viewed with caution at best, and outright disgust at worst.

The SALT cap is a tax deduction that allows Americans to deduct certain state and local taxes from their federal tax receipt in order to avoid this money being taxed twice, once at the local level and once at the federal level. President Trump's Tax Cuts and Jobs Act instituted a cap on this deduction, limiting the deductible income to ten thousand dollars. It has been estimated by the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center that lifting the cap would cost the United States government 1.2 trillion dollars over ten years. This is a truly staggering sum, and would represent a massive drain on resources at a time when all federal expenditures need to be closely examined.

Lifting the cap would also mean approving a massive giveaway to America's wealthiest citizens. The Tax Policy Center estimates that Americans making over 430,000 dollars a year would see three-quarters of the benefits of a lifted SALT cap. Considering the drastic cost-of-living crisis in this country, it is simply absurd to consider putting the needs of these wealthy Americans over the much more pressing needs of poor and middle-class Americans. All Americans would be better off if their government was able to pay down it's debt after twenty years of financial mismanagement.

If the government really wanted to help everyday Americans, they would take the steps that are necessary to balance the budget and pay down our debt. Raising taxes on wealthy and middle-class Americans would be unpopular, but are necessary actions to restore fiscal health. Instituting far-reaching cost-containment measures for federal healthcare costs would save billions, as would a responsibly run single-payer healthcare program. While these proposals may seem unrealistic, they are much more sensible than lifting the SALT cap.

This issue is not a partisan one. It is a moral one. When President Trump and many Democrats state their wishes to spend billions of our dollars annually on a giveaway to the wealthy, we should be as clear as possible in our denunciation of such ridiculousness. The deficit is not a state issue or a local issue, but a national issue. Therefore, we should reject out of hand unnecessary political giveaways that only benefit a small fraction of Americans.

## Emilee Brownell (Essex High School, Junior)

### Saving Ourselves

My dad, Seth Brownell, was a lineman for years. Growing up, he would consistently tell my sister and me about the importance of electricity and how our phones, iPads, and computers all use it to function. I never really gave it any thought until I got older and realized the effects of that power. Today, data farms require a tremendously high amount of energy; 1,000 terawatt hours is predicted to be the annual requirement for data farms by 2026. That is approximately identical to Japan's electric consumption. These farms require a significantly high amount of energy and are the main contributor for the carbon dioxide polluting our air.

Because data farms require so much power, that means that more has to be made. The fastest way to do so is by burning fossil fuels which is responsible for 74% of the carbon dioxide emissions in the US. Generating power is the greatest factor in global warming. According to Landgate, one wind turbine takes up 80 acres of land and can affect the local wildlife. Solar farms require an excessive amount of space as well. Pivot Energy highlights that the average solar farm requires 10-20 acres of land; for every direct megawatt, five acres of buildable land is essential for success. Turbines and solar farms are an unreliable source that evidently depend on weather and don't work as quickly as burning fossil fuels.

New nuclear energy can be key to countering this problem. The word nuclear often brings up difficult topics: Three Mile Island, the Chernobyl disasters, or the radioactive waste produced. However, since today's nuclear technology is more modern, it can be placed in rural areas, and society has a better understanding of it. Not only is less land required for new nuclear power, it's also always accessible and can produce much more power with minimal nuclear fuel because it has a higher energy density than fossil fuels. While many worry about the disposal of nuclear waste, only about 3% of it is the long lived, greatly radioactive form of waste. With that, isolation is required, but with the new high tech safe disposals that combine containment and geological deposits, waste is isolated for thousands of years protecting us and our environment. Though it does come with some risks, new nuclear power is a safe, low profit, efficient fuel source. It produces no emission, ultimately cleaning our air. Using new nuclear power prevents carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere. The amount of carbon dioxide prevented is equivalent to removing a third of all cars around the world. The demand for a safe, low profit power source is rapidly growing, and new nuclear power meets all these requirements.

Though nuclear power may seem like a scary, dangerous solution to the extensively high amount of energy data farms consume, ultimately it's the most reliable, safest solution. Not only does it save money, it also reduces the amount of carbon dioxide being emitted into the atmosphere, into the air that we breathe.

## **Sofia Bush (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)**

With the patchwork of health insurance and care we call a system, many Americans are left in crippling medical debt. This makes the United States an outlier among industrialized nations, both in the systems we use and the startling incompetence within them. Every single industrialized country, except the United States of America provides universal health care (Vladeck). For affordable and efficient healthcare, Medicare in the US should be expanded into universal National Health Insurance.

The way in which Americans receive and pay for health care today is deeply flawed compared to other countries, it is highly ineffective and significantly more expensive. Industrialized countries follow three main health insurance models, the Beveridge model, Bismarck model, and National Health Insurance model.

Equitable access to care is a good indicator of the effectiveness of health care in a country. Compared to similar countries, the US has very inequitable access to healthcare. The Commonwealth Fund found that the US had the highest income related discrepancies in care, as well as the most "instances of unfair treatment or feelings that health concerns were not taken seriously by health care professionals because of their racial or ethnic background" (Blumenthal et al.). This indicates inequitable access to care as unfair treatment leads to patients not receiving the care they need, as well as breaking trust between the patient and provider. These discrepancies reinforce the idea that this system is ineffective because it shows that it prioritizes some patients over others. Though healthcare in America is so ineffective, it's remarkably overpriced. Americans spent more than 16% of GDP on healthcare in 2023 (Blumenthal et al.). For context, that's about 1.5 times more than many countries with universal healthcare. This indicates that Americans are pouring money into a poorly performing healthcare and insurance industry.

To make healthcare more affordable and effective, we should turn to the National Health Insurance model by expanding Medicare into mandatory universal healthcare. This would decrease inequalities and administrative challenges, and lay a foundation for a healthier nation, as treatment and preventative care will be more accessible. One estimate says that switching "increases life expectancy by almost 2 years, grows the population size by 3 percent, and increases worker productivity through improved health" ("Medicare for All: Comparison of Financing Options"). To fund this, there should be an income based tax increase, which would be cheaper than what most Americans pay for healthcare now.

So, our healthcare system is more expensive with worse performance compared to other similar countries. Making Medicare universal would result in more effective and affordable care, which would build a foundation for a healthier nation. Healthcare is an issue that touches every one of our lives, though some more than others. But overall, to build a strong, healthy, productive nation, we must start with an effective and accessible health care system.



## **Aleksandra Cirovic (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)**

The impacts of fossil fuel-driven climate warming were more evident and catastrophic than ever in 2024. Globally, 26 of 29 warming-induced weather events caused over 3,700 fatalities and displaced millions. Hurricane Helene left 230 dead in the U.S., with rising ocean temperatures exacerbating the devastation. Climate change is among the most urgent crises we face. At the heart of climate change lies consumerism, where our insatiable desire for more products depletes resources and heightens carbon emissions. To address this, we must incentivize eco-friendly products, implement green taxes on high-footprint goods, and enforce stricter industry regulations to minimize waste.

With a growing global population, the demand for resources has surged. Currently, the structure of our food systems enables significant food loss, contributing to global waste. According to National Geographic, over 1.3 billion tons of food is wasted each year. The pattern of waste extends to plastic and other recyclables. The massive amounts of plastic waste that companies generate, from food packaging to clothing, is severely detrimental to our environment. The levels of plastic in the ocean are expected to quadruple over the coming years, highlighting the growing severity of the issue, according to the World Wildlife Fund. This culture of consumerism, driven by our unappeasable demand for products, produces overwhelming waste, accelerating climate change and threatening biodiversity.

Our demand for goods releases toxic gases during production and delivery as well. We are consuming our planet's resources 1.7 times faster than it can regenerate, as reported by The Guardian. The World Wildlife Fund's warning that, without a significant change in consumption rates, Earth "will expire by 2050" underscores the urgency of the situation. The rise in overconsumption has led to a higher demand for goods, and consequently, a greater reliance on processes that utilize fossil fuels. Overconsumption culture leads to higher reliance on dirty energy, directly threatening the climate by exhausting resources and increasing emissions.

As a Youth Representative on the Vermont Climate Council, I witness how the effects of climate change are becoming ever more evident. From rising temperatures to unpredictable weather patterns and their impact, the need for action is undeniable. In my meetings and climate conversations, the urgency for transformative change grows stronger with each discussion. There is no doubt that climate change is the most unavoidable issue we face.

We have the power to redefine the future. Our government can subsidize manufacturers meeting sustainability standards to reduce production costs and make eco-friendly products more competitive. It can also implement policies to incentivize green innovation and support sustainable technologies. Individuals purchasing energy-efficient appliances, electric vehicles, or sustainable products could receive tax credits. Green taxes on carbon usage and plastics can fund renewable energy, public transit, and sustainable development. Strict waste limits should be set for industries, with penalties for exceeding them. The government can enforce regulations to minimize pollution and promote responsible resource use. For the health of the world and its people, the time to act is now.

## **Allie Hamilton (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)**

In Shakespeare's iconic play *Hamlet*, the protagonist declares, "These words like daggers enter in mine ears." This allusion to a weapon of death serves as a powerful lens through which to explore the contentious topic of gun control in contemporary society. Gun violence, much like daggers, leaves wounds that resonate across families, communities, and nations. Gun control has been a subject of intense debate, particularly in the United States, where the Second Amendment enshrines the right to bear arms. In 2023, over 43,180 deaths in the U.S. were attributed to firearm incidents—more than the toll of war. These numbers are not just statistics; they represent lives lost, families devastated, and communities torn apart. As Hamlet struggled with violence, so too must we confront the deadly repercussions of gun violence. This ongoing conversation centers on regulating firearms—how to prevent crimes, reduce gun violence, and ensure public safety, all while respecting the rights of individuals to own firearms.

The gun possession debate centers on the belief that citizens should have firearms for self-defense and protection against government tyranny. However, safety is essential for freedom to thrive. Research shows that countries with stricter gun laws have fewer gun-related deaths. For instance, after Australia enacted strict gun laws in 1996, firearm-related deaths, including mass shootings, significantly dropped. In contrast, the U.S. sees over 43,180 firearm deaths annually, underscoring the need for stronger regulations. Stricter laws aim to balance individual rights and public safety, ensuring both liberty and life can prosper.

Mental health must be part of the gun control discussion, as nearly 60% of U.S. gun-related deaths are suicides, many involving legally obtained firearms. The 2012 Sandy Hook tragedy, where the shooter had a history of mental health issues but easily acquired firearms, highlights the need for mental health evaluations in the gun purchasing process. By addressing both gun access and mental health, we can prevent tragedies, reduce violence, and save lives.

The issue of gun control is undeniably complex. However, it is clear that balancing individual rights with the need for public safety is critical. Stricter regulations, greater mental health support, and public education on responsible gun ownership are necessary steps to reduce gun violence and ensure a safer society. The cost of inaction is too high—each preventable death is a tragedy, and every missed opportunity for reform prolongs the crisis. Freedom without responsibility leads to chaos; safety without liberty breeds oppression. We must find a balance between these forces. This issue is not just about policy—it's about human lives. The right to bear arms must be paired with the responsibility to protect others, ensuring that both safety and liberty are preserved. This is an urgent call to action—an intersection of gun ownership, public safety, and mental health that demands thoughtful, evidence-based change. The future of our communities depends on it.

## **Mia Konefal (South Burlington High School, Freshmen)**

The health of our citizens is the most rudimentary, yet fundamental part of what allows our nation to thrive. The skyrocketing prices of prescription medication, hospital trips, and doctor appointments, which are all necessary to ensure the safety and comfort of American citizens, is an issue that needs to be immediately addressed. With prices that just keep rising, I fear for the 16.9% of Americans who, according to the National Library of Medicine, report difficulty affording healthcare; I fear for the millions of people who struggle with or ignore pain and other health issues because they cannot afford treatment.

During recent years, the United States has experienced soaring prices of treatments, medication, and health insurance on levels not previously seen. Despite healthcare being undeniably necessary for our citizens, and therefore our country, to succeed and prosper, millions of Americans are unable to afford the treatment they need. According to the Centers for Medicare Services, in 2022, "the healthcare spending in the United States reached \$4.9 trillion," which means on average, each person in America spends \$14,570 per year on healthcare. While these rising and unpayable costs are an issue across the globe, the rising costs are especially apparent in the United States. In fact, according to the National Institutes of Health, "The United States spent approximately twice as much as other high-income countries on medical care."

Although several acts exist that attempt to combat the inflating prices of healthcare services, such as the "Lower Costs, More Transparency Act," which passed the House of Representatives, and advocates for more price transparency in the healthcare sector, I believe that a large part of the issue lies in the simple fact that the United States remains an outlier in terms of per capita health care spending. The simple yet undeniable fact is that our citizens pay more for healthcare than citizens of any other country.

To combat the skyrocketing prices of the healthcare sector in the United States: I would propose a multi-tiered plan. Firstly, the large, private pharmaceutical companies should no longer be permitted to put their own profits over the health of Americans. For decades these huge insurance and pharmaceutical companies have been able to rip off American people with high prices for medication and treatments that are necessities. A cap for what each individual can pay for medication per year should be implemented. Secondly, a national healthcare system, similar to Medicaid, which is guaranteed for those 65 and older, that guarantees healthcare for all, not just those who can afford it, should be introduced. Healthcare should become a constitutional right, not just a privilege for those who can pay.

The unreasonable prices of prescription medication, insurance, and doctor's visits are actively working against our citizens, preventing our country from flourishing. If nothing is done, prices will only continue to increase and the percentage of Americans who are uninsured or cannot afford healthcare will likewise grow. Steps need to be taken to ensure the health of our citizens.

## Hazel O'Brien (Twinfield Union School, Senior)

On November 5th, 2024, California held elections to determine the representation of their state in the U.S. House of Representatives. Fifteen million voters across 52 congressional districts pledged their ballots, and when the results became clear, the Democratic Party won 60% of the popular vote while the Republican Party won 40%. Despite this result, the seat share of the Californian delegation will be 43 Democrats to 9 Republicans, approximately 83% to 17%. This is the plurality voting system in action, a process that left 6,000,000 Californian Republican voters grossly underrepresented.

Most elections in the U.S. use a plurality voting system, which drives political polarization as the party duopoly becomes entrenched, and demonization becomes a tactic to prevent spillage of voters between the parties. Though this system is deeply embedded in contemporary American democracy, there are paths to improvement. For one, we can look to the proportional systems that successful democracies implement abroad. A great example of a proportional election system is the use of multi-member districts. This method takes the idea of a congressional district and essentially lowers the threshold of popularity a party must receive to earn representation by increasing the number of seats held in the district; this way an accurate reflection of the entire voting public can be achieved as opposed to just the plurality opinion.

Multi-member districts were once permitted in the U.S., but due to threats of misuse by segregationists in response to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it was banned in 1967 under the Uniform Congressional District Act (UCDA). The UCDA had the aim of eradicating bloc voting, a system that utilizes multi-member districts to neglect minority representation. It unfortunately also set single-member districts as the only legal means to host elections for the House of Representatives, a major cause of our plurality system. The solution here is relatively uncomplicated on its face, the process by which laws are passed mirrors very closely the way in which they are repealed. With a simple bill intended to counteract and nullify the UCDA, a breakthrough is possible. If that bill included clauses detailing how to mandate standards of proportionality and representation, such as specifically banning abusive practices like bloc voting, then we could see significant changes with the successful installment of multi-member districts.

Many in Congress will likely be resistant to the idea of an alteration considering it is directly tied to their positions of power. However, we can already see the movement necessary to make progress. Maine passed Measure 5, an act to establish ranked choice voting on the federal level, via citizen initiative in 2016. Alaska in 2020 also passed a similar measure through referendum. This demonstrates electoral reform is something the voting public considers a priority and by harvesting this momentum we can demand Congress to finally take action.

## **MacKenzie Russell (Harwood Union High School, Junior)**

Public education is crucial to the development of society. School prepares students with the knowledge and skills needed for civic engagement, and also provides a space where students can discover their interests and explore the pathways available to them - and teachers are the backbone of this whole system. However, schools struggle to achieve this purpose when staff inconsistencies arise. The teacher shortage - an issue that Senator Bernie Sanders has raised before - is a national problem currently affecting 86% of public schools across the nation (NCES). Though Sanders has advocated for something to be done about this, there hasn't been the support needed to put a solution into action. To make progress on this issue, solutions must address the multiple perspectives that many feel Sanders' proposal overlooks.

Staff shortages are increasingly prevalent in our schools today. Public schools have trouble filling not only teaching positions but also bus drivers, substitutes, and food workers. As of October 2024, 35% of public schools were operating with at least one open position (NCES). Even with just one vacancy, class sizes and courses offered are often impacted. With fewer teachers available, many schools have to combine classes, which increases average class sizes. Not only does this provide less personalized and one-on-one learning for the students, but it places more pressure on teachers to accommodate more students.

Compared to a decade ago, the number of people pursuing teaching has decreased by 20-30% (Aldeman), showing that college-age students' interest in teaching is declining. The main reasons are apprehensions about salaries and working conditions. Teaching positions earn less money than other jobs earned by a college degree, giving the job a huge downside for people choosing a profession. And furthermore, even if schools fill their teaching positions it's likely they won't be able to keep a steady staff team. In 2022, 55% of teachers decided to leave their job earlier than expected (Walker), often with stress or work overload factoring in this decision.

The Pay Teachers Act was introduced to the Senate in March of 2023 (Stanford). The Act proposes a minimum wage of \$60,000 for all full-time teachers - a number that could increase with promotions and experience like usual. A set minimum wage would address the disinterest in being a teacher due to the salary, but some argue that wouldn't solve the issue. Salary isn't the only downside many find in teaching, as in addition lots of teachers report difficult working conditions within their jobs. A solution to this national teacher shortage would need to recognize the concern with salaries as well as the work environment.

To bring the suggested solution to fruition, and garner more support from opposing lawmakers, more importance should be placed on creating a more manageable and less stressful environment for teachers. In addition to offering a minimum salary of \$60,000, benefits like sabbaticals or retention bonuses could incentivize new teachers to commit to the career. They ultimately would also allow teachers to de-stress, helping to renew their enthusiasm for teaching.

## **Hannah Smiley (Milton High School, Senior)**

For nearly two centuries, Church Street in Burlington, Vermont has been the heart of the state and the nucleus of the city—a lively community marketplace, bustling with shops and restaurants. In recent years, however, it has become a common controversial topic at gatherings or in any conversation; an issue that cannot be ignored. What was once a charming, safe city has become a dismal and even daunting area for Vermonters. What caused this change? The homelessness crisis that is plaguing the entire nation.

Let's be clear; the issue isn't panhandling or encampments, rather it is the government's alarming lack of moral accountability and commitment to its citizens. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development reports that over 653,000 Americans—a population greater than Wyoming and the same as Vermont—were unhoused this past year, yet societal stigmas or the ideal of American individualism have led this issue to be disregarded as a competition for mere existence, or survival of the fittest. Rather than focus on the root causes of inflation, low wages, and lack of government support, people place blame on the victims. Unhoused people are villainized for their attempts at survival. The housing crisis is complex, however, there are concrete solutions.

The US government has the moral responsibility to fulfill its Constitutional promise; "to promote the general welfare" of all Americans. This includes addressing the homelessness crisis which directly affects the welfare of citizens. The most comprehensive solution must include immediate relief for unhoused communities and a means of addressing the root causes of this crisis. According to this formula, the best solution to solving this epidemic is "Housing First" initiatives. This approach to the homelessness crisis, developed in New York City, is a form of publicly-funded permanent housing that includes additional support to aid unhoused people. In short, the "housing first" model is designed to move long-term unhoused individuals—"the majority of whom are living with mental illness, substance abuse disorders, and other serious health problems," adds the Coalition for the Homeless—into subsidized housing with the addition of community support services. This type of housing support allows unhoused people to see health improvements and is proven to be less costly than forms of temporary care such as emergency shelters and correctional facilities. In addition, prevention programs, such as discharge plans for youth in the foster care system and policy change regarding a living wage, are vital to America's future.

Many argue that providing adequate aid to fix the housing crisis is too expensive to sustain. This has led to temporary "fixes" such as wiping out encampments, leaving unhoused people with limited options. This may be successful in easing the guilt for citizens as they won't see unhoused people in their communities, however, ignorance is not a solution. Unethical practices are extremely harmful to unhoused people and an ineffective use of funding.

The US government must recognize the severity of this crisis and enact permanent policy to create long-term change.

## **Winslow Solomon (Vermont Commons School, Senior)**

Three-fourths of adults in the United States are overweight or obese, according to a new study in *The Lancet*, making the U.S. the most obese high-income country. The obesity epidemic is a national emergency threatening our health and economy, and Congress must act quickly to understand and address it.

Obesity and overweight in American adults has risen quickly from just over half of adults in 1990 to three-quarters today. Increased consumption of energy and flavor-dense ultra processed foods engineered for irresistibility, limited access to expensive fresh produce, and normalization of sedentary lifestyles are all contributing to weight gain. New studies on the role of food-processing and genetics in weight gain show that more than calories and nutrients are involved in a healthy diet. The *Lancet* study predicts that the number of overweight people will reach nearly 260 million by 2050, growth that will put extreme strain on our society.

The effects of overweight and obesity are numerous and extreme. According to the CDC, overweight and obesity lead to health issues from type 2 diabetes to sleep apnea, stroke to osteoarthritis. Adults with a BMI of over 25 (overweight) or 30 (obese) are more likely to develop cancer and high blood pressure and experience worse mental health and early death. If we allow the obesity epidemic to continue, we will cause great harm not just to those suffering from obesity-caused diseases, but also to the economy and the healthcare system. A Joint Economic Committee Republicans report in 2024 estimated that obesity will result in \$9.1 trillion extra medical cost to the country over the next ten years.

It is time for Congress to pass legislation making healthy lifestyles more economical for Americans. Addressing the obesity epidemic requires a multi-faceted approach, combining lifestyle change with medication and surgery. While new medications like Wegovy and Zepbound can offer quick changes in weight, their high costs are prohibitive on an individual and nation-wide scale. Weight loss from such drugs is quickly reversed after medication stops. The most effective, long-term means of battling obesity is change in diet and exercise. As recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Heart Association, the government must consider subsidies for healthier foods, taxes on ultra processed foods and sugary drinks, limits on food advertising, and warning labels on obesity-causing foods. It is important to encourage healthy diet and exercise in schools, where habits start. Public discussion must avoid causing weight bias or fatphobia which cause mental harm to people suffering from obesity and make it harder for them to become healthier.

Congress has been successful in improving Americans' health in the past: CDC data shows a drop over 30% in adult smoking since 1965 after acts banning advertisements and placing warnings on tobacco products were passed. Taxation of sugar-sweetened beverages in Chile and Mexico resulted in significant decreases in purchasing of 21.6% and 6.1% respectively. If we act now, we can offer a happier and healthier country to the next generation.

## Owen Stygles (Bellows Free Academy Fairfax, Senior)

The 1990 Children's Television Act sought to empower the FCC to regulate children's media, requiring that it hold a certain level of educational value, and that the advertisements aired during children's shows meet specific guidelines. This bill came to be as a result of the growing television entertainment industry, and the worries surrounding how it affected children's minds and development. It was also deemed important due to the nature of advertising towards children, as they are largely unable to distinguish advertisements from tv programs, and are easily influenced.

I mention this bill because it lays a strong foundation: children's media needs to support development, and highly suggestible children need to be protected from advertisers. I especially highlight this second point, as there would be far fewer issues if children were not such an easily targeted demographic, furthermore, broadcasters would be less likely to fund shallow, attention-grabbing shows in the first place if they weren't as profitable, allowing higher quality programs to make way on their own.

This all brings us to today, where children are switching away from television, and towards digital media, such as YouTube videos. This new media, of course, is largely unregulated in comparison to broadcast television, and advertisers are now at liberty to exploit children's unawareness to commercials once again. Not only this, but the nature of what kids view, outside of the ads, is also less valuable, as it is being made only to hold their attention until the next ad. Cocomelon, one the largest channels on YouTube, is a notable example of this. They feature a near-endless supply of videos geared towards children that aim simply to hold their attention for as long as possible. Using bright colors, songs, and sound effects, this content manipulates children into viewing for extensive periods of time.

The exploitation of children's attention is an undervalued and often missed issue related with the rise of digital media. This does not mean, however, that healthy content is not present. Many educational programs, such as Sesame Street, have created an online presence that is far more constructive for children, and, most importantly, isn't structured around making kids watch as many advertisements as possible. Because of this, I think the center of the problem lies in how high quality content is easily bogged down by the onslaught of this lower quality content, as it is far easier and faster to create.

Akin to how you find organic food by looking for the USDA stamp of approval, I think children's content online should be tested and labeled for its quality. This would give educational and developmentally useful content a way to stand out among the rapidly uploaded, low quality content. It would also provide a kind of "guide" for parents, which would make their job of overseeing what their children watch far simpler. While this solution isn't perfect, I believe it to be the best way to end this highly underappreciated issue that is actively impacting millions of children's development.



## **Amy Vaughan (Oxbow High School, Junior)**

Climate change is at the forefront of issues in the nation; however, its effect on farming and food systems is often overlooked. Climate change poses a growing threat to agriculture through fluctuating weather patterns that cause crop losses and increase production costs (EPA). These disruptions jeopardize food security and threaten farmers' livelihoods. While the challenges are significant, an effective, sustainable solution is to support outreach and educational initiatives, particularly through university extension services. By increasing funding for these programs, farmers and other individuals can be equipped with the knowledge needed to adopt climate-resilient techniques, strategies, and practices (University of New Hampshire Extension). This approach will strengthen the agricultural industry's ability to navigate a changing climate.

In recent years, farmers have faced increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, including severe droughts, flooding, and fluctuating temperatures (NOAA Research). These changes contribute to soil degradation, water shortages, and crop failure (Chicago EPA). A study from the United States Department of Agriculture found that "Increased temperatures can also lead to issues like crop sunburn from extreme heat, which can reduce annual yields for farms by as much as 40%" (USDA Climate Hub). This, in combination with other climate issues, results in decreased farm revenue adding to farmers' struggles with financial instability (USDA ERS). Data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis states that "agriculture and related industries contributed roughly \$1.537 trillion to the U.S. GDP in 2023". Given the importance of agriculture to U.S. food security and the economy, we can not ignore the effects decreased farm revenue would have on our society as a whole.

One step towards a solution is strengthening educational outreach efforts which can support farmers in understanding how to deal with this rising challenge. Land-grant universities have historically played a vital role in broadcasting research-based agricultural knowledge to the farming community (Association of Public Land Grant Universities). These programs offer valuable resources on crop management, pest control, irrigation techniques, and more (UW-Madison Extension). Many extension services include these topics in their program objectives. However, despite the acceleration of climate change, many extension services are underfunded and ill-equipped to meet the growing demand for climate-specific information.

Increased investment in these programs will provide farmers with timely, actionable climate advice. University-led outreach programs can teach farmers about climate-resilient practices such as regenerative farming, crop diversification, and soil health improvement techniques (University of New Hampshire Extension). Furthermore, extension services can introduce precision agriculture technologies to optimize crop monitoring and resource use. Addressing the impact of climate change on agriculture requires more than just technological innovation or policy reform. It requires empowering farmers with the knowledge and tools to adapt. By investing in outreach and education through university extension programs, the United States can build a more resilient agricultural system capable of weathering the challenges of a changing climate, ensuring long-term food security and sustainable farming practices for future generations.